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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program at the Vallejo (California) School District involving the use of instructional support teams composed of principals and teachers from each school to promote instructional improvement by increasing school-site leadership and teamwork between administrators and teachers. First, background information is given to provide a contextual description of the school district setting, the recent history of staff development programs in the district, and the entire district staff development program. Second, a philosophical and conceptual description of the purpose of the teams is provided. Third, the selection, training, and function of the teams is outlined. Finally, a case study is provided of the operation of an instructional support team in one elementary school from the perspectives of a principal and a teacher who are team members. Advantages of the instructional support teams include (1) shared responsibility between administrators and teachers, (2) greater interaction among professionals over matters of importance, and (3) an ongoing means for developing and using staff expertise and leadership capacity. (TE)

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# IMPROVING INSTRUCTION WITH SCHOOL-SITE SUPPORT TEAMS

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A great deal of the literature on school improvement and instructional improvement focuses on the leadership abilities of the principal and on the components of effective classroom instruction. The Teacher Center movement focused attention on the importance of peer support among teachers. There is currently legislation and a great deal of interest in the concept of mentor teachers. The Vallejo Professional Development Center has tried to combine the best of both worlds by developing a program to train Instructional Support Teams composed of principals and teachers from each school in the district to promote instructional improvement at their own sites. This paper is a description of that effort.

This paper will describe the program that began in September 1981 and is currently being implemented to use Instructional Support Teams in the Vallejo School District. First, background information will be given to provide a contextual description of the school district setting, the recent history of staff development programs in the district, and the entire district staff development program. This will provide a necessary backdrop for understanding the relationship between the support team and previous and ongoing programs. Second, a philosophical and conceptual description of the purpose of the teams will be provided. Third, the selection, training, and function of the teams will be outlined. Fourth, a case study will be provided of the operation of an Instructional Support Team in one elementary school from the perspective of a principal and teacher member of a team.

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

It is important to provide a description of the context in which Instructional Support Teams were developed in Vallejo because the program evolved as a part of a long-range, district-wide, comprehensive staff development program. The school district, itself, is a medium-sized school district by California standards, in a small urban community. The school district began developing a comprehensive district staff development program in 1976. The Instructional

Support Team training is only one component of the current staff development program.

School District Setting

The Vallejo City Unified School District has an average daily attendance of over 14,000 students. Vallejo is a low-income, multi-racial community in the North Bay Area of California. There is a strong incentive to improve instruction because there is a continuing need to improve student performance and achievement. Student achievement is improving but the educational needs of the students continue to be great and the range of student ability and achievement is very wide.

The Superintendent and the School Board have made instructional improvement the number one priority of the district and have chosen staff development and curriculum development efforts as key interventions for improving instruction. The Superintendent and School Board have allocated resources accordingly. Major investments have been made in the professional development of principals and teachers. Because Vallejo is a low-wealth district, the investment in staff and curriculum development efforts has limited, in comparison to wealthier districts, Vallejo's resources for many programs. The district has adopted a philosophy and practice that the investment in the skill and talent of the professional staff will yield the most direct benefits in increased student learning.

The teaching staff of the district is very diverse in terms of experience, age, and ethnic and racial origin. Housing is still being built in Vallejo so it has not been a declining enrollment district and has regularly hired some new teachers. Because the district has established and maintained a close working relationship with a number of neighboring colleges and universities, many of the new teachers are recruited from local teacher preparation programs.

The district currently has a written Five-Year Plan for Instructional Improvement that was adopted by the School Board in 1982. The plan is based on priorities set as a result of an extensive community goals assessment process. It specifies annual objectives to improve instruction and a specific sequence for relevant program development efforts. Instructional Support Teams are an implementation strategy that came out of the Five-Year Instructional Improvement Plan. All district administrators have individual evaluation plans that directly relate to the annual objectives in the Five-Year Instructional Improvement Plan. Principals are supported by the immediate staff of the Superintendent and evaluated by the Superintendent. One of the evaluation objectives every principal has is to provide leadership to the Instructional Support Team at the school site. Thus, a strong structure and accountability exists to support the Instructional Support Team program.

## History of the Vallejo Staff Development Program

The Vallejo School District began developing a district-wide staff development program. The original source of funding was the State Professional Development Program Improvement Center which, at that time, allowed services to be provided only to Title I schools. Consequently, the Vallejo program initially served only the ten Title I elementary schools. Plans were developed to include the remaining five elementary schools and the seven secondary schools. In 1978 Federal Teacher Center funds provided the resources to include all of the non-Title I schools. The Vallejo professional development programs have been funded by a variety of sources since its inception. It is now primarily funded by Chapter II and district funds.

The foundation of the Vallejo Professional Development Center training in instructional effectiveness and instructional supervision has been the work of Madeline Hunter. As the training program has grown, the work of many others has been integrated including Bruce Joyce, Gene Hall, the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study, Fred Jones, etc. Each year, the program changes based on teacher needs, district programs, and current research findings. A strong emphasis on classroom observation, feedback, and coaching has been present in the Vallejo program from the beginning.

## Current District Staff Development Program

The current district program has many components. Individual teachers may request to attend cycles during release time that focus on:

- Instructional Effectiveness (Hunter)
- Curriculum
  - The District Curriculum Management System
  - Math
  - Science
  - Social Studies
  - English
  - Writing
- Child Development
- Classroom Management
- Nutrition
- Special Needs
- Parent Involvement

Every semester a ten-week after-school series is offered for credit on topic areas of particular interest to teachers. Several after-school series on computer use are currently being given. The Bay Area Writing Project is offered in summer and after-school cycles. Every summer, workshops are offered for credit on topics identified as high interest or need areas by teachers.

The district has a system for granting district professional development to individuals and groups of teachers for engaging in professional development activities outside of the duty day. A district committee composed of six teachers nominated by the district and an administrator appointed by the Superintendent approves or disapproves requests for credit and completed activities. The Director of Professional Development is the secretary to the committee and all records are maintained in the Professional Development Department.

The district program just described provides professional development services to individual teachers. The cycles are taught by teacher trainers and augmented heavily by classroom teachers that have particular areas of expertise. Throughout the existence of the Vallejo Professional Development Center, an ongoing training program for site administrators in instructional supervision has been conducted. The Instructional Support Team training is a separate function of the Professional Development Department and will be described later in this paper.

## PURPOSE OF THE INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT TEAMS

By 1981, the district had site administrators who had received several years of training in instructional supervision, and a large group of teachers who had been refining their instructional skills through training and daily practice in the classroom. A need existed to strengthen school-site staff development programs and support systems in addition to maintaining a strong district-wide training program. The Instructional Support Teams were formed to recognize and use the talent available at the school site and to increase the amount of feedback and coaching available to classroom teachers.

The main purpose of establishing Instructional Support Teams was to improve instruction by increasing school-site leadership and teamwork between administrators and teachers. Underlying the entire professional development program is the belief that a common language and framework for analyzing and refining teaching is essential to instructional improvement. Administrators in Vallejo play a central and important role in teaching and using a common language, but so do teachers. Teachers who have successfully applied teaching skills in the classroom provide the richest source of expertise the district has.

A strong commitment exists in Vallejo to fully develop and use school-site leadership. Each school has unique needs and strengths, and a very special set of resources. An underlying premise of the Instructional Support Team program is that each school must assume the responsibility for its instructional program, but that the district needs to provide the necessary leadership, support, and resources to enable each school to meet school and district goals.

Teamwork is a very important theme in Vallejo. There is a deep conviction that goals are best accomplished by teams. The Instructional Support Teams are one manifestation of the commitment to teamwork between administrators and teachers. Administrators are expected to provide leadership by sharing risks and decisions with teachers. Trust is best built by successfully meeting challenges together. The Instructional Support Teams provide an important vehicle for teacher leadership and ownership of the school program.

## ORGANIZATION OF SUPPORT TEAMS

The Vallejo Instructional Support Team program was built on a strong foundation of individual staff development and administrative training. It is important for other districts to recognize the length and depth of previous professional development efforts in Vallejo before adopting or adapting the program. Almost every member of an Instructional Support Team has had a number of years of training and practice prior to the advent of Instructional Support Teams. This section will describe selection procedures, training, and function of the Instructional Support Teams.

### Selection

Each school in Vallejo has an Instructional Support Team. The principal has the primary responsibility for working with the Central Office staff and the school-site staff to select Instructional Support Team members. Each team consists of the building principal and four or five teachers. Secondary school vice-principals are also team members. The following criteria were used to select teacher members of Instructional Support Teams:

- Demonstrated excellence in the classroom in terms of using elements of instruction to teach the state and district curriculum.
- The respect and confidence of the principal.
- Respect, confidence, and credibility with the staff.
- Previous district training in teacher effectiveness.
- Demonstrated willingness to learn and help others learn.
- Willingness to commit time to meet with the support team, train other teachers, and act as a peer coach.

Instructional Support Team members do not receive additional compensation. They are provided with release time to attend training and, whenever possible, are released to observe other classrooms and provide feedback to teachers.

## Instructional Support Team Training

The 1983-84 school year marks the third year of existence of the Instructional Support Teams. Each year has had a different training focus. The first year focused on developing skills to observe and analyze teaching and plan and deliver instructional conferences. The second year focused on developing skills to observe and provide feedback to teachers in classroom management. The third year is focused on developing school level instructional improvement plans for the 1984-85 school year.

Instructional effectiveness (1981-82). The training program has two basic components, in-Center training and on-site follow up. In the 1981-82 school year, the participating principals and teachers received six to eight days of training in instructional effectiveness, lesson analysis, and conferencing skills. In the Center, they focused on increasing their individual and collective skills as team members in observing and analyzing teaching and planning conferences. At the school site, the Instructional Support Team practiced their skills and developed a support network. Principals and teachers scheduled classroom observations in volunteer teachers' classrooms. They practiced the observation and conferencing skills they learned in the Center and gave one another feedback. A trainer from the Professional Development Center was also available to assist in the application of new skills. In addition to practicing their own skills, the Instructional Support Team planned ways to expand the support network by providing other teachers the opportunity to observe one another's classrooms and provide each other feedback.

Classroom management (1982-83). In the 1982-83 school year, school-site support teams were trained in the area of classroom management based on the Classroom Management Training Program developed by Fred Jones. They received six to eight days of training in the Center. At the school site, they trained other staff members in classroom management techniques. Classroom observations and conferencing continued. The support teams increased their repertoire of skills so that they could assist their peers with classroom management as well as their instructional skills. Some support teams were also involved in planning curriculum implementation activities at their school sites.

School level planning (1983-84). The 1983-84 school year focuses on training school support teams in the areas of school effectiveness research and school-level planning. Each school will develop the capacity to develop and implement a year-long plan which will reflect the school district's Five-Year Instructional Improvement Plan. The team will also develop plans for continuing observations and conferences and training in classroom management.

During the early part of the 1983-84 school year, the Instructional Support Teams will receive training in school effectiveness

and a district-adopted planning process and format. They will receive updates from all Instructional Division Departments regarding the components to be included in the plan. During Spring 1984, the Instructional Support Team will work with their school-site staffs to write a School-Level Instructional Improvement Plan for the 1984-85 school year. The following components will be addressed in the plans:

- Use of Standardized Test Data
- Instruction
- Curriculum Implementation
- Staff Development
- Computer Education

Function of Instructional Support Teams

Each school has used its Instructional Support Team in its own way. Functions that are common to all schools are training and coaching. Every team has done some training of its school staff in areas in which the team, itself, was trained (instruction and classroom management). Every team has provided coaching to teachers and many teams have also assisted in curriculum implementation efforts. The district has recently adopted new continua, criterion-referenced tests, student profile cards, report cards, and courses of study. Many of the Instructional Support Teams have helped see that the curriculum is actually used.

Principals have used Instructional Support Teams as problem-solving groups. The Instructional Support Teams may advise the principal and assist in the planning and implementing of any activities which affect the school. Principals express enormous enthusiasm for having a group of teachers to provide staff input and help in decision making.

Each Instructional Support Team has made decisions about the readiness of the school-site staff and the appropriateness of specific activities. In some schools, a great deal of teamwork and communication already existed and the Instructional Support Team was a natural extension of existing activities. In other schools, many teachers had been operating in isolation for some time and the initial activities of the Instructional Support Team focused on building trust.

A very important distinction of function which needs to be made clear is that the Instructional Support Team is not involved in teacher evaluation. Because peer coaching is a somewhat new phenomenon, this was an important clarification. Classroom observation by support team members are always voluntary on the part of classroom teachers. Under no circumstances would Instructional Support Team observations become a part of personnel evaluation data. In many schools, teachers have requested Instructional Support Team

assistance in the accomplishment of evaluation objectives, but these interactions are not part of the personnel record.

It is very important for each Instructional Support Team to explain its function to the rest of the staff. It is designed to be a support system for teachers, but apprehension has been expressed by some teachers. The Vallejo Education Association president has been very helpful in clarifying the intent and use of the Instructional Support Teams in allaying fears of teachers.

## CASE STUDY

Every school, from the smallest elementary school in Vallejo to the largest comprehensive high school, has an Instructional Support Team. This case study focuses on Cooper Elementary School. Cooper School was chosen because it has a new principal and a staff that did not have a history of working together or a strong support network. Cooper School provides a relevant case study because it's a school that had to start at the beginning in terms of building an Instructional Support Team and gaining staff acceptance.

### Principal's Perspective

Ellen became the Principal of Cooper School in the Fall of 1981, the year Instructional Support Teams were formed. When she came to Cooper School, she found a dedicated staff of individuals who were accustomed to working in isolation. She followed a principal who almost never held staff meetings. Her major goal during her first year as principal was to develop staff cohesiveness and begin building a collective commitment to instructional improvement. The Instructional Support Team was a vital part of Ellen's plan and she made her team a very high priority in her own schedule.

Forming the Instructional Support Team was a challenge for Ellen. Very few of her teachers saw themselves as leaders. She convinced three members of her staff to be on her Instructional Support Team. One member was a primary grade teacher with 18 years of classroom experience whom Ellen knew as a colleague at another school earlier in her career. She had high regard for Dorothy as a classroom teacher and asked her to be on her team. John, an intermediate-grade teacher, was active in setting up school-wide sports programs. In addition to being a strong classroom teacher, he was well liked by the staff and brought a school-wide perspective to the team. Linda, a kindergarten teacher, had previous experience as a resource teacher in categorically funded programs. She, too, brought to the team an understanding of the school as a whole in addition to highly successful classroom teaching experience.

Ellen made the establishment of the team itself and a beginning acceptance by the staff her first goals for the Instructional Support Team. During the first semester of the first year, the members of the team met with Ellen just to establish themselves as a team. Later in the year, Ellen and the Instructional Support Team began explaining their purpose to the rest of the staff. Most of the on-site practice of lesson analysis and conferencing skills occurred within the team. A few visits were made to classrooms of teachers who showed a strong interest in and willingness to received feedback.

During the 1982-83 school year, the Cooper Instructional Support Team expanded its efforts. Team members were assigned to work with individual teachers. The Instructional Support Team did not necessarily work in depth with every teacher on the staff. They assigned themselves not by grade level but by interest, and began forming support relationships with other teachers. For instance, Dorothy assisted teachers who had classroom management concerns. John worked with teachers who were interested in receiving feedback and coaching on their instructional skills. Linda worked with teachers who were interested in more fully developing their reading programs or in implementing the bay Area Writing Project.

The response of the staff was varied. Some staff members were very open and receptive to peer coaching. Other teachers were more tentative and reluctant. The Instructional Support Team honored the readiness of individual teachers. Team members made themselves available to the staff and worked in a variety of formal and informal ways based on the responses they received. Ellen and her team agreed it was more important to be sensitive to the staff and to build sound relationships than to jeopardize the team's effectiveness by rushing staff acceptance.

During the Spring of 1983, the Instructional Support Team did some staff workshops in classroom management based on the training the team had received at the Professional Development Center. The staff response was very positive. This gave added confidence to the Cooper Instructional Support Team and also provided an avenue for increased support activities with the staff. Several staff members requested assistance with classroom management after the on-site workshops.

Ellen expanded her team during the 1983-84 school year. Linda was transferred to another school. Two new members have joined the Instructional Support Team to learn the district planning process and work on the school plan. Unlike the beginning of the Instructional Support Team program, Ellen had more teachers wanting to be on the team than training spaces available. She created an expanded Instructional Support Team by developing roles for individuals who make specific contributions to the school program. One member of the expanded team is training the rest of the staff in the use of computers in the classroom; another member is providing training in

the use of the District Curriculum Management System; and a third member is responsible for school-wide sports activities.

Ellen speaks glowingly of her Instructional Support Team. She found it invaluable as a first year principal to have a group of advisors who already knew the staff. She finds that many of her objectives for improving instruction at Cooper School are best carried out by teachers helping teachers. Ellen places real value on Instructional Support Team activities and allocates a generous amount of time to meet regularly with her team. She has seen vast changes in the Cooper Staff since Fall of 1981. In 1981 very few teachers chose to attend training at the Vallejo Professional Development Center. Most classroom doors were closed and many were locked. By Fall of 1983, every teacher in the school signed up for at least one training cycle at the Professional Development Center and many teachers were opening their doors to their colleagues. Ellen credits the Instructional Support Team with much of this success. The members of the Instructional Support Team give much credit to Ellen for her leadership, commitment, and sensitivity.

Teacher's Perspective

Dorothy had been a classroom teacher for 18 years when Ellen came to Cooper School. Ellen and Dorothy began teaching the same grade in the same school as first year teachers. Dorothy respected Ellen and wanted to support her. Dorothy remembers clearly the day Ellen asked her to consider being on the Instructional Support Team. She recalls thinking that she was very comfortable in her role as a classroom teacher. She recalls being much less comfortable with the idea of being a coach to her peers. This was not a role she had envisioned for herself, but she agreed to accept Ellen's invitation.

Dorothy agrees with Ellen that it was important to take the time to build the team's confidence and to begin introducing the team to the rest of the staff. Assigning team members to individual teachers was an effective way to begin. It provided team members with a narrower focus based on individual interest and expertise, and limited the number of teachers with whom to establish a working relationship. Dorothy did a lot of informal visiting after school and talking with teachers to begin establishing rapport. Eventually, she began visiting some classrooms. Dorothy has particularly vivid memories of working with a teacher who had a difficult class and a number of classroom management concerns. The previous year Dorothy had a similar class, so she had a great deal of first-hand experience as well as more recently acquired techniques to offer her colleague.

Dorothy is very enthusiastic about her experiences as a member of the Instructional Support Team. She has learned many new skills, gained a great district-wide perspective, and developed her leadership abilities. She also expresses articulately the benefits to the school staff. She sees much greater enthusiasm for teaching with her

fellow teachers, a commitment to ongoing staff development, and greater staff cohesiveness. Dorothy's own career has changed as a result of her Instructional Support Team experience. In Fall, 1983, she became the Instructional Associate at Cooper School. The Instructional Associate's position is funded by the school's State School Improvement Program. Dorothy finds herself full time in a resource teacher or program manager role. Her Instructional Support Team training and experience are invaluable as she fulfills new responsibilities at her school.

## SUMMARY

Vallejo has found many advantages to establishing Instructional Support Teams: (1) The Instructional Support Team concept promotes shared responsibility between administrators and teachers. Principals are expected to develop their own skills in instructional effectiveness and share the responsibility for the school program with teachers. Teachers are expected to play an active role in working with the principal to make key decisions about instruction. (2) The focus on classroom visitations, observations, and conferences reduces the "loneliness" of the classroom. There is a great deal more interaction between professionals over matters of importance when there is a planned program rather than an occasional burst of communication over problems. (3) The Instructional Support Team builds leadership capacity. In every school there are teachers who have the interest and ability to share their well-developed expertise with their peers. Too often because of time constraints and past practice, their talents were not tapped. The Instructional Support Team provides a vehicle for developing and using staff expertise.

After some initial apprehension on the part of some teachers, the support teams have achieved overwhelming success. The president of the local Teachers' Association has heartily endorsed the teams and encouraged all teachers to view and use the team as a resource. The district administration is thrilled with the surge of teacher leadership and the productive, collaborative relationships between teachers and administrators that have resulted from the program. Principals feel extremely well supported and teachers have expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the peer support that is now available to them.